Why Do We Need to Bother? Public Library Services for LGBTQI People

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Abstract

In considering social justice, many commentators overlook (or disregard) the needs of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, or intersex (LGBTQI), assuming, for example, that they do not require any particular support or recognition, or that they "self-exclude" by "choosing" to be LGBTQI. This article aims to challenge these perceptions. Young (and not-so-young) people may find it easier to come out today—and, indeed, the necessity to have life framed by coming-out stories may be fading. Nevertheless, we know that many people still struggle and still have to face hostility, threats, even violence. Suicide rates among young LGBTQI people, often the result of bullying, are unacceptably high. The cultural sector, including public libraries, can play a huge part in combating prejudice by providing safe, informed (and informative) spaces where people can explore who they are, and be who they are as well. However, not all public libraries understand this, or want to play this role. This article identifies some of the needs and demands of LGBTQI people, demonstrates the good practice that public libraries have developed, and examines gaps where this is not happening. The focus will be primarily on public libraries' work in the UK. It looks at some of the key background issues (prejudice against LGBTQI people, for example), then focuses on the ways in which the public library can intervene, concluding with practical examples of the range of work that is being undertaken and some suggestions of what still needs to be done.

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Introduction

This article is written from the following perspectives: that public librarianship is not a science, and therefore cannot be examined in a scientific way; that working with people, especially those who are disadvantaged, has to be an organic, iterative process, based on the needs of those communities, and that simply replicating a piece of work carried out elsewhere will not necessarily be successful; and that it is intended to be of use to practitioners.[1] It examines the relationship between libraries and people who identify as LGBTQI: lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, and intersex. It takes the position that people do not "choose" their sexual orientation—but may choose whether to claim a particular identity or not, and, increasingly, may call themselves "queer," thus refusing to be pigeonholed. There are some further thoughts about definitions at the end of this piece.[2] The focus of the article is primarily on public libraries' work in the UK.[3]

Social Justice and the Public Library

"Social justice" is a broad concept, often defined as relating to economics, especially redistribution (International Forum for Social Development, 2006), but this article argues that social justice needs to be considered more widely than in just economic terms—and that public libraries have a big part to play.

As noted above, the term "social justice" is often taken to mean a redistribution of resources; for example, the Global Greens Charter stated: "We assert that the key to social justice is the equitable distribution of social and natural resources, both locally and globally, to meet basic human needs unconditionally, and to ensure that all citizens have full opportunities for personal and social development . . ." (Global Greens, 2001, p. 3).

Wider definitions (which are closer to what we can achieve in public libraries) were used by the Welsh Assembly: "Social Justice is about every one of us having the chances and opportunities to make the most of our lives and use our talents to the full" (Welsh Assembly Government, n.d.); and by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA): "The term 'social justice' implies fairness and mutual obligation in society: that we are responsible for one another, and that we should ensure that all have equal chances to succeed in life. In societies wherein life chances are not distributed equally, this implies redistribution of opportunities, although the shape that such redistribution should take remains contested" (RSA, n.d.).

This usage of the term was taken up by the then Museum, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in one of its workshops looking at aspects of public library development: "giving people access to the information, services and facilities that they have a right to, and making sure that they are fully aware of and know how to take up their entitlement to these

services—with a particular emphasis on providing services for the most needy" (MLA, 2007, p. 9).

Further interest in and support for social justice work by public libraries came from the charity the Paul Hamlyn Foundation which, as part of its Social Justice Programme, was a major funder of library initiatives (summarized in Carpenter, 2010).

In *Public Libraries and Social Justice* (2010), John Pateman and I argued that "Public libraries do have the potential to be powerful forces in the fight for social justice, just as they have shown in their work to support, for example, refugees and asylum-seekers, unemployed people, young people with autism, looked-after young people, and so on" (p. 142) and that, as a result, there is an urgent need "to put social justice at the heart of what public libraries are about" (p. 141). In relation to public libraries and LGBTQI people specifically, I have argued elsewhere that

> the starting point for work on social justice is that we know that the cultural sector tends to be under-used by people who are socially excluded. This may be people who have visited once but not found what they wanted, and/or were not made to feel welcome; people who have used our services but have found them wanting; and people who have no real idea of what the cultural sector offers. Our work must therefore involve assessing who is not using our services and finding ways of meeting them to make some sort of "offer"—with the aim that, of course people do not have to use us, but their decision not to should be a conscious one, rather than because they do not know or understand what we do . . . We know that some LGBT people do use our services (do we actually know how many?) but what about the people who do not? Were they made to feel "different" or unwelcome? Did their experience of visiting/using us show them that we do not have anything to offer? (Vincent, 2014, p. 5)

We Shouldn't Still Need to Be a Special Case

In the year 2015, it seems strange that we should still need to write about the library and information needs of LGBTQI people—after all, we've achieved equality, haven't we, and public libraries are for all, aren't they? Let's look at some of the realities.

In the UK, there have been major advances in equality for LGBTQI people since the mid-1990s, including, for example, levels of equality under the law thanks to the 2010 Equality Act; the introduction of the new offence of incitement to homophobic hatred in 2008; and civil partnership and marriage rights (Marriage [Same Sex Couples] Act, 2013).

However, at the same time, it is worth remembering that "Section 28" was removed from the statute books only very recently: in 2000 in Scotland, and 2003 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Introduced in 1988 by an administration that was determined to clamp down on the teaching of "positive images," "Section 28" was suddenly introduced into a Housing Bill and, incredibly, became law (Local Government Act, 1988).

Its two key planks were that a local authority "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality," nor "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."

Although no prosecution was ever brought under this legislation, its existence had its desired effect, with a growing fear that particular actions *might* break the law. Prior to 1988, there had been a boom in the provision of library materials and services for LGBTQI people (for example, the production of booklists, displays of LGBTQI-related material, and celebration of Lesbian and Gay Pride), but after 1988 such provision plummeted. Despite legal advice that should have reassured public libraries that providing information (addresses of local LGBTQI organizations, for example) was entirely within the law, many local authorities stopped their services for LGBTQI people, and some refused to stock LGBTQI newspapers and magazines.

Since 2003, provision has restarted (particularly the support for LGBT History Month), but there are people working in and using public libraries who still think that "Section 28" is extant—and that any "positive" provision risks breaking the law. The fact that one group of people who have what the UK 2010 Equality Act terms "protected characteristics" could have been discriminated against by law until so recently is quite extraordinary.

One of the results of this has been a confusing mixed message: LGBTQI people are protected by law now, yet prejudice, bullying, homophobia, even violence are still rife. While many young people, for example, are relaxed and comfortable with a range of sexualities, nevertheless "there is no doubt that, in many ways, things have got better for us queer folk and yet, despite all the progress, we still live in a country where two-thirds of gay teenagers are bullied at school. Why are things so slow to change?" (Condou, 2011).

Library Attitudes toward LGBTQI People

Times and attitudes have changed in public libraries—in the UK, at least—over the last twenty years. We have moved from outright hostility from some library staff toward LGBTQI library users (and colleagues) to a much greater level of acceptance and understanding of our needs. However, such progress is still tempered by the view of some that this is a private matter and not a topic that needs to be (or should be) discussed; and/or that LGBTQI people have chosen their "lifestyle" and should keep quiet about it.

This dismissive attitude on the part of some library staff was captured in a focus-group discussion for a study carried out by Sheffield University: "I think it's when councils or libraries have these mad cap, well not mad cap because we're not allowed to say that, but you know these short term fund-

ing projects that it goes astray . . . if they stopped looking at these short term little pockets of activity . . . and silly political correctness . . . we had gay and lesbian fiction, now it's gay, lesbian, bisexual, transvestite . . . could they add any more initials? You know does it matter? A good book is a good book, does it matter if it's written by or aimed at a gay person or lesbian?" (Wilson & Birdi, 2008, p. 59).

In another group discussion, similar concerns mingled with antipathy toward equality monitoring: "Identify groups and engage with them—but how do you identify e.g. LGBT users? You can't quantify—yet figures are what the SMT [Senior Management Team] wants. Why should people declare disability, sexuality, ethnic origin? So how can you be expected to have numbers (i.e. to please SMT etc.)?" (Wilson & Birdi, 2008, p. 171).

I have been working as a trainer with library staff, focusing on LGBTQI issues, for over fifteen years, and it is interesting to note that there is much less open hostility to talking about library needs of LGBTQI users (and nonusers), although still a prevalent view, as noted above, that it does not really need to be something that a library has to worry about. There are parallels with other groups with "protected characteristics"; for example, forty years ago there was a distinct lack of interest/indifference toward the needs of people from Black and minority ethnic communities, yet provision now has become more-or-less mainstream (Vincent, 2009).

Some Examples of Positive Work by Public Libraries

These examples fall broadly into two categories: those focusing on LGBT History Month, and those which have been woven into the mainstream library provision.

LGBT History Month

The activities to celebrate LGBT History Month have included the following:

- Author/book promotions, book displays, and booklists: In February 2014 Bedford Borough Libraries organized an evening event with author and journalist Paul Burston.
- Exhibitions: Jubilee Library, Brighton, arranged an LGBT Exhibition for Holocaust Memorial Day (observed in the UK and other countries on January 27) in January 2012.
- Events and activities: In February 2014, the Jubilee Library, Brighton, hosted an afternoon event, "Trans Performers and Poets"; also in February 2014, as part of a wider program of events, the London Borough of Waltham Forest Libraries organized showings of two LGBTQI-interest films, *Tomboy* and *Behind the Candelabra*.
- Taking part in wider events and activities outside the library: At the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library in 2012, there were over forty different stalls inside the Forum and outside on Theatre Plain. They

included local support groups, major Trade Unions, national charities, and local craftspeople; there was a Pride Film Festival in Fusion in the Forum, with thirty minutes of LGBT films (looped throughout the day) from local and national filmmakers on Fusion, Europe's largest public access screen; a display in the library itself; the Pride opening ceremony took place just outside the Millennium Library on Millennium Plain; there were Rainbow Families story and craft sessions for children in the children's library; a craft workshop in the library organized by the local group Sew Gay; a rest area on the second floor of the library for disabled and elderly people attending Pride events; and the mobile library van visited Chapelfield Gardens for the Pride picnic and took part in the Pride parade (J. Holden, personal communication, July 2012).

Mainstream Library Provision

Examples of services that have been developed include the following:

- Allocating a proportion of the stock fund for purchasing LGBT-related material
- Putting together LGBT collections—for example, at the five largest libraries in Tameside (Tameside Metropolitan Borough, 2012)—and often including magazines as well as books and other materials
- Producing promotional booklists: for example, Barnsley; Devon (Devon County Council, n.d.); East Sussex (East Sussex County Council, n.d.); Hampshire (Hampshire County Council, 2012); Hertfordshire; Highland Council (The Highland Council/Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd, 2012); Medway (Medway Council, 2012); and West Sussex
- Provision of information

Taking a Systematic Approach to Developing Public Library Provision for LGBTQI People

Background Work

As with any work to promote social justice, it is important before beginning to ensure that you have mapped out the territory: for example, develop your (and your colleagues') awareness of the national context; explore what other similar organizations have been doing in this area of work; and check whether there are local/regional issues that you need to consider: for example, are you working in an area where there is rural isolation and few large urban centers where LGBTQI people may meet?

Again before starting, ensure that your values are transparent and make it clear why you want to build the relationship with local LGBTQI people. You will also need to be realistic and prepared for skepticism: "There may be those who have experienced discrimination in the past and are sceptical about collaboration; those who are suffering from 'consultation fatigue' and are unconvinced that their input will be taken seriously or those who are unaware that authorities are now obliged because of . . . commu-

nity strategies to consult with marginalised groups" (Creegan & Lee, 2007, p. 16). You will need to be open and responsive, both to the local community and to your colleagues; to respect confidentiality and provide a safe environment; and, most importantly, to be welcoming and inclusive. As one of the interviewees for my book said, "Within the LGBT community, some groups are less well-served than others. Bisexual, trans and genderqueer people tend to get overlooked, so collections or events that are billed as 'LGBT' may not in fact include any content specifically targeted at these communities. Other groups, such as asexual and intersex people, are even omitted from the acronym" (E. L. Chapman, personal communication, November 2012).

Getting to Know Your Community

Check, for example, if there has been a survey of LGBTQI people and/or provision of services for them in the area. Are there regional or local groups that you can work with? Local meeting places, pubs/bars/clubs? Use magazine listings and Internet searches to find groups and venues in your area. Can any of your own colleagues, and those in other local authority departments/government agencies, provide you with information, contact names, suggestions of organizations to visit? If necessary, consider carrying out your own research: NHS (National Health Service) Northwest has produced a good introduction (NHS Northwest Health Equality Library Portal, 2009; Grant & Williams, 2011).

Consulting with Your Community

Common methods include holding meetings, carrying out visits, organizing focus groups, and reaching out to nonusers (e.g., via outreach programs, the Internet, and social media). Good practice in consulting with LGBTQI people also includes building joint ownership of the consultation process, avoiding being victim focused, and using appropriate language: "At the outset of consultation meetings, ask lesbian, gay and bisexual people how they would like to be addressed" (Creegan & Lee, 2007, p. 17). Do remember that no one speaks for all or any one group of LGBTQI people, and don't mislead in terms of the scope of services you could offer. Finally, remember that "it can be challenging to reach groups who may have felt in the past that the service had little to offer them" (E. L. Chapman, personal communication, November 2012).

Engaging with Your Community

Start to engage with your community by assessing what your service can contribute within its existing resources. Begin, perhaps, with an event that you can focus on/organize around, such as LGBT History Month, local LGBTQI Pride activities, or specific temporary exhibitions/events that will raise your profile.

Drawing on Others' Good Practice

Look at what good practice other people have developed. This could be broad guidance, such as that produced by the campaigning organization Stonewall, whose good-practice guide, *How to Engage Gay People in Your Work*, offers "practical advice on how to engage lesbian, gay and bisexual people in decision-making about local services in cost-effective and appropriate ways" (Miles, 2011). There is also guidance available for working with a specific group, such as Black and Minority Ethnic LGBTQI people (Guasp & Kibirige, 2012, pp. 26–29), young people, or trans people (e.g., see "10 Keys to Becoming a Trans Positive Organisation," in Gooch, 2011).

Mainstreaming

It is vital to translate all of this groundwork into an ongoing, sustainable activity. In order to do so, a strong management (and policy/strategic) commitment is needed from "champions" who will help to promote this work within and across the organization and lend support were anyone to object to the development of LGBTQI provision. There must also be staff commitment, for while an individual often has the passion to get a service/activity started, s/he will burn out unless other staff members are also involved (and, as a library is an "official" service, there should be no excuse for non-involvement). Finally, engage in a broad, cross-organization approach, along with involving the local community.

Taking Action

Once the commitments are in place, proceed with actions such as ensuring volunteer and community involvement; for example, in running or corunning an LGBTQI reading group; obtaining and maintaining adequate levels of resources to develop the service, including promotion and advertising, and for running events; coproduction and sharing information; and promoting the library's services and resources.

Involving Your Community

Wider community involvement is important, too; for example, designating the library as a site for reporting hate crimes, or as a natural center for events and activities: "One of my proudest moments of recent times, when I was a very senior manager indeed, was the fact that the central library was overwhelmingly the obvious choice to host so many LGBT events for the city—Pride drop in, LGBT History Ball, community awards . . . a sign we were doing something right. . . . As communities everywhere face serious challenges, now is exactly the moment for libraries to cement themselves as key to communities, and all of the diverse groups that make living together what it is" (D. Murray, personal communication, November 2012).

Staffing Issues

Staff need to be completely confident in dealing with LGBTQI visitors, staff, content, and any issues that may arise. In order to facilitate this, we need to ensure that our organizations' policies are positive and clear about welcoming LGBTQI staff and service users (and also about how any issues of homophobia or harassment will be dealt with). Senior managers need to speak out about the importance of an inclusive workplace and to demonstrate that their actions mirror this commitment.

Recruitment of staff is important: Does your organization target any of its recruiting specifically toward LGBTQI people? Are your recruitment practices positive (for example, toward someone who is transitioning)? Do you monitor recruitment, such as looking at the number of LGBTQI people who self-identify and apply for posts and the number appointed? Once staff have been appointed, it is vital to provide training and awareness raising as well as mentoring, as has taken place in four local authorities in West Yorkshire: "In a collaboration between four local councils, a viable mentoring scheme was set up, with the aims of improving motivation and leadership development of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans employees" (Somerset, 2011, p. 13).

Work with and support workplace and Trade Union LGBTQI groups and re-examine your professions' approaches. Does your professional body have a current set of policies about supporting LGBTQI people? Does it have up-to-date information about the make-up of its members? What is its stance on supporting members faced with homophobia?

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluating provision of services and their reception/participation by the community is absolutely critical for checking to see if what we are doing is worthwhile and is working and to gather evidence which can lead to change: What lessons have we learned from this? What goes well? And less well? In addition, we can use the results of monitoring and evaluation for performing the following functions:

- Benchmarking
- Evidence gathering
- Testing hypotheses
- Gathering information to report to funders
- Giving participants a voice
- Gathering information and learning in order to develop advocacy
- Gathering information which will feed into the political and economic contexts in which we work
- Building up a demonstrable model of practice
- Sharing good practice
- Demonstrating impact

Helpful UK-published guides include *Everything You Wanted to Know about Sexual Orientation Monitoring . . . but Were Afraid to Ask* (NHS Northwest Health Equality Library Portal, 2009; Grant & Williams, 2011); Stonewall's *Monitoring: How to Monitor Sexual Orientation in the Workplace* (Cowan, 2006), and *Workforce Monitoring for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* (UNISON, 2007).

What Led to these Positive Developments?

Although changes in the political climate have been an obvious influence on the growing acknowledgment and acceptance of the LGBTQI community, were there other factors that contributed to these developments? The following appear to be among the most significant:

- A number of notable strong individuals championed work with LGBTQI people.
- Some managers also started to champion work with LGBTQI people and to support the increased engagement of LGBTQI staff.
- Organizations, both inside and outside the public sector, made strong equality commitments and backed them with actions, such as developing equality targets.
- There was also a growing global interest in rights and equality.
- There was a strong recognition that the generation of people who had led on many of the LGBTQI changes in society were getting older and, if their oral histories and personal collections and stories were to be added to the record of historical material, then action needed to be taken to encourage deposits and community collecting activity, to support strategies for sharing, and so on.

What Still Needs to Be Done?

Briefly, continuing needs can be summarized as follows:

- There has been a real growth in recognition of the importance of observing LGBT History Month in February. However, such recognition is by no means universal, so it is vital that all cultural sector organizations get involved in this.
- At the same time, it is also important to ensure that activities are not just restricted to February but are programmed throughout the year and as part of all the organization's other work.
- Staff attitudes are absolutely critical, and there needs to be a real effort across the sector to increase staff development opportunities and to tackle prejudice as it arises. There also has to be a real move to ensure that all staff are engaged with and supporting their organizations' social justice work.
- Finally, as I noted in the conclusion to my book (Vincent, 2014), there is very little recorded LGBTQI history within the cultural sector be-

fore the 1970s–1980s. Urgent work is required to capture the history of LGBTQI library, museum, archive, and heritage work and reminiscences of staff from the 1950s and 1960s.

Notes

1. This article builds on my book *LGBT People and the UK Cultural Sector: The Response of Libraries, Museums, Archives and Heritage since 1950* (2014), offering a practical "taster" of this larger work. For the book, I drew on the following: a literature search of UK-based writings on LGBTQI issues (the text is supported by some nine hundred bibliographical citations); email correspondence and interviews with people working in the cultural sector; my experience of fifty-plus years of working in public libraries and knowledge of the cultural sector; and a lifetime of experience as, and writing about, being a gay man. I also drew on the literature scanning that I carry out continuously in order to gather information to disseminate via newsletters and ebulletins for The Network. This organization assists the cultural sector (including libraries, museums, archives and galleries, and other heritage organizations) in working toward social justice (The Network, 2013).
2. Regarding the term "transgender," the terminology is constantly shifting and will continue to evolve (as, indeed, is the case with sexuality and gender generally). A recent definition states: "Transgender is an all-encompassing term for people that cross gender boundaries, permanently or otherwise. Many prefer 'trans' as the umbrella term. 'Trans' includes, but is not limited to: people who live in the opposite gender to that registered at their birth, whether or not they have undertaken gender reassignment surgery, transvestites who cross-dress, intersex people who are born with anatomy or physiology which differs from norms associated with male and female anatomy, and others who do not identify with traditional female and male norms. Some people may not identify with being male or female and may prefer 'third gender'" (Women's Resource Centre, 2010, p. 1). The Scottish Transgender Alliance helpfully represents the range of gender definitions using a "Transgender or Trans Umbrella" that includes transsexual women (male to female); transsexual men (female to male); intersex people (see below); androgyne and polygender people; and cross-dressing and transvestite people (Scottish Transgender Alliance, n.d.-a).

   Regarding androgyne people:

   > Some people find they do not feel comfortable thinking of themselves as simply either male or female. Instead they feel that their gender identity is more complicated to describe. Some may identify their gender as right in the middle between male and female, while others may feel mainly male but not 100% male (or vice-versa not feel 100% female). Alternatively, they may entirely reject defining their gender in terms of male and female in any way. As their gender does not conform to traditional ideas of gender as binary, they have created new words to describe themselves, the most common are *androgyne*, *polygender*, *genderqueer* or *third-gender*, although other terms are also occasionally used. However, some people will prefer not to define themselves using anything more specific than just transgender or trans." (Scottish Transgender Alliance, n.d.-b; emphases in original).

   Regarding cross-dressing people: "People (usually males) who call themselves *cross-dressing* or *transvestite people*, dress as the opposite gender for emotional satisfaction, erotic pleasure, or just because they feel more comfortable doing so. They feel a strong recurring desire to cross-dress but are generally happy with their birth gender and have no wish to permanently alter the physical characteristics of their bodies." (Scottish Transgender Alliance, n.d.-c, emphases theirs).

   It is also worth noting that increasing numbers of LGBTQI people are opting for the simpler and less defining "queer" to describe themselves, and this is particularly the case with younger people: "This has become increasingly acute during the past few years because current cohorts of same-sex oriented teenagers are resisting identifying themselves with sexual terms, for personal, political, and philosophical reasons. Some identify as gay and have no same-sex attraction or behavior, while others have only same-sex attraction and behavior and do not identify as gay because the concept does not fit their experience" (Savin-Williams, 2009, p. 34).

3. The position in the UK is different from that in the US, in that in the UK there is no equivalent of the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT) within CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, UK). The GLBTRT has a key role in raising LGBTQI issues and developing advocacy at a national level and also provides links from its website to key resources (American Library Association GLBTRT, n.d.). CILIP has a number of special interest groups, one of which is the Community, Diversity and Equality Group, which has a remit for advocating for LGBTQI provision and staff support, but, currently, its role is quite broad.

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John Vincent has worked in the public sector in the UK since the 1960s, primarily for Hertfordshire, Lambeth, and Enfield public library services. In 1997, he was invited to become part of the team that produced the UK's first review of public libraries and social exclusion; this report was published in 2000 (Muddiman et al., 2000), and has provided guidance and a framework for public libraries' engagement with their communities (see, for example, Working Together Project, 2008; Pateman & Williment, 2013). From this project The Network was born, the role of which is to assist the cultural sector (including libraries, museums, archives, galleries, and heri-

tage organizations) in working toward social justice (The Network, 2013). John now runs courses and lectures, writes, produces regular newsletters and ebulletins, and lobbies for greater awareness of the role that libraries, archives, museums, and the cultural and heritage sector play in contributing to social justice. He is particularly interested in supporting the work that the cultural sector does with LGBTQI people, with young people in public care, and with "new arrivals" to the UK. He is the co-author (with John Pateman) of *Public Libraries and Social Justice* (2010) and author of *LGBT People and the UK Cultural Sector* (2014). In February 2014, John was awarded a Special Diversity Award by the Community, Diversity and Equality Group of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) "for his outstanding achievement in the promotion of diversity through library and information services." In September 2014, John was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of CILIP.